

## MIXING POPULATIONS IN STATE ELDERLY/DISABLED HOUSING PROJECTS

Connecticut's first state-funded elderly/disabled housing projects were authorized in 1959 and targeted initially for persons over age 65 who were unable to afford suitable housing without financial assistance. Legislation enacted in 1961 amended the definition of elderly for the state elderly/disabled housing program to include low-income persons certified by the federal Social Security Administration as being totally disabled. While younger disabled individuals have been eligible to reside in state elderly housing for over 40 years, the projects were occupied primarily by elderly persons until the mid-1980s. As the number of younger persons with disabilities living in state elderly/disabled housing projects has grown, the problems associated with mixing tenant populations with different styles of living also have occurred with more frequency.

In March 2004, the Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee was asked by more than 60 members of the General Assembly to review the state policy of non-elderly disabled individuals residing in state-funded elderly/disabled housing projects. The committee authorized a study focused on examining the problems arising from this state housing policy and exploring options and alternatives for resolving them. The primary purpose of the committee's study was two-fold: examine the nature and extent of problems arising from this policy; and explore options and alternatives for resolving them.

Committee research revealed the policy has both social and financial implications. The policy's social impact concerns the reported negative incidents resulting from young disabled persons living in the same projects with elderly individuals. Over the years, there has been much discussion, although little documentation, of problems between the two tenant groups, ranging from lifestyle clashes and fears based on misconceptions about mental illness, to actual physical conflicts, disruptive behaviors, and criminal activities.

The financial impact of the policy is related to the very low incomes and potentially longer tenures of young disabled residents as well as the growing presence of this group on project waiting lists. In combination, these trends could present a serious challenge to the financial viability of state elderly/disabled projects. The same trends may also result in less access to this affordable and accessible housing resource by low-income persons of any age.

Many factors in addition to policy, management, and funding matters contribute to the social and financial problems found in state elderly/disabled housing, including one major issue beyond the scope of this study - the state's affordable housing crisis - and another beyond the control of any legislation - resident attitudes. Solutions examined by the committee, therefore, were also multi-faceted. On December 21, 2004, the committee adopted a series of proposals for addressing negative incidents and economics within the state projects through: more effective housing management tools; better support from and collaboration among state agencies; and stronger planning, oversight, and leadership by the state's lead housing agency.

The committee also considered a spectrum of policy options related to changes in tenant eligibility. Each option has benefits and drawbacks in terms of addressing social and financial problems and, to varying degrees, may be subject to legal challenges. In addition, many of the policy and administrative solutions would require more state resources and some would entail significant funding increases. The program review committee did not endorse any one option:

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however, it did adopt a recommendation that \$10 million be appropriated annually to create additional affordable housing for low-income elderly and disabled persons.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Social Impact

- Of the 80 housing authorities responding to the committee's survey, 57 (71%) reported the occurrence of at least one negative incident (i.e., an occurrence that disrupts the safe and secure enjoyment of home and/or property) in the previous six months; 23 (29%) reported having no such incidents.
  - Based on data from the committee survey, the portion of tenants, both young and old, involved in negative incidents at state elderly/disabled housing projects is relatively small (6%). As a group, younger persons with disabilities were more likely than elderly tenants to be involved in negative incidents.
  - Of the total 1,103 negative incidents reported by the 57 housing authorities, almost three-quarters (819) fell into the broad category of lease violations. Another 153 were incidents identified as "serious" and 131 were complaints of inappropriate social behavior. Approximately 17 percent of the total incidents required police intervention.
  - The state's operating manual for subsidized housing outlines the eligibility requirements; however, it does not address tenant screening. The existing housing manual for the management of state financed housing is in need of updating and does not address certain essential topics.
1. **DECD, in conjunction with CHFA, should revise and update the contents of the operating manual for state funded elderly/disabled housing programs no later than January 1, 2006. Specifically, DECD, in consultation with the state Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities (CHRO), should develop guidelines for tenant selection and suitability that are in accordance with all relevant state and federal laws. In addition, DECD should also seek input from social service agencies such as DMHAS, DMR, and DSS in the development of such screening criteria. Furthermore, the manual should address the need for a policy and documentation of negative incidents.**
    - Inconsistencies in the way wait lists are created and maintained make it difficult to use wait list data for planning or needs assessment purposes and may result in inequitable treatment of applicants. Data are not centrally compiled and local authority policies and procedures are not monitored.
    - DECD provides little guidance on waiting lists and tenant selection policies for state elderly/disabled housing to local housing policies.
  2. **The DECD operating manual for housing should include the creation and maintenance of wait lists and training regarding state affirmative fair housing requirements including but not limited to the use, maintenance, and selection from wait lists be re-instated.**
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- More aggressive lease enforcement is needed. Documentation, such as a tenant's signed acknowledgement, that he or she has been informed of obligations and consequences of non-compliance, is also important if and when eviction proceedings are initiated.
  - Housing authorities would benefit from more guidance on ways to build stronger eviction cases such as the importance and methods of complaint documentation, techniques to gather and retain witnesses, and mediation strategies. In addition, suggestions on pooling resources to purchase legal services or selecting legal counsel would be beneficial.
- 3. DECD, in conjunction with CHFA, should consult with Connecticut housing court specialists and the Connecticut association of housing authorities on developing possible seminars or materials on eviction proceedings.**
- Acknowledging budget constraints, housing authorities must be allowed to increase the presence of management and develop adequate security to promote a sense of personal safety for their residents. An increased presence of housing authority staff may be necessary to be kept informed of potential problem situations that may not be apparent during the day.
  - The absence of a unified approach by law enforcement and community support services providers in responding to calls for service raises concern for the safety and well being of residents at mixed population housing developments.
- 4. Local housing authority plans for safety and security measures should be part of the required management plan submitted annually for review. In addition, housing authorities should be encouraged to establish rapport with local police departments outlining respective roles and responsibilities in responding to negative incidents.**

### **Resident Service Coordinators**

- Recognizing the need to link tenants with appropriate social services, the legislature created the Resident Service Coordinator (RSC) program in 1998. DECD has only been able to provide grants to the housing authorities that originally requested funding although others might benefit from the availability of an RSC.
- Although the program was not intended to be limited to elderly residents, the current RSC job description only references services to the elderly.
- RSCs in state funded elderly housing are not required to have any initial or ongoing training for their position, particularly in regard to conducting client needs assessments.
- There is limited oversight of the RSC program; DECD primarily reviews financial compliance. RSC quarterly and year-end activity reports are not used for program monitoring; report data are frequently inconsistent and incomplete.

5. **DECD should determine the number of additional housing authorities that would be interested in applying for a resident service coordinator grant and based on this information submit an appropriation request to the legislature for FY 07.**
6. **By July 1, 2005, DECD, in consultation with agencies that provide social services to elderly and non-elderly disabled populations such as DMHAS, DSS, and DMR, should reassess the job description and accompanying qualifications for resident service coordinators to reflect the services needed by all groups residing in state funded elderly/disabled housing. In addition, DECD, in consultation with DMHAS, DMR, and DSS, should establish the number of hours and salary rate reflecting the level of skills and qualifications needed to adequately service this housing population.**
7. **DECD should enlist professionals from mental health and other service agencies to train resident service coordinators and housing authority staff to better understand the needs of elderly residents as well as persons with disability and related problems.**
8. **DECD should create a single statewide manager position for the resident service coordinator program. At a minimum, this individual should:**
  - **assist in measuring housing authority interest to re-open availability of the RSC grants;**
  - **revise the content and format of the existing RSC reporting requirements;**
  - **periodically monitor the activities of resident service coordinators through a review of the newly revised reporting instrument;**
  - **provide technical assistance and guidance to RSCs in their roles and responsibilities including but not limited to the assessment of resident needs;**
  - **evaluate the training needs of the currently employed resident service coordinators and arrange on-going training for all resident service coordinators as needed;**
  - **act as a liaison between resident service coordinators and the social service agencies to further collaboration efforts as well as develop opportunities for resident education and awareness of disabilities; and**
  - **prepare and maintain a resource guide including but not limited to identifying contact information and available services from the potential social service agencies across the state.**
- **Housing authorities and resident service coordinators must be able to tap into existing resources in the community and receive timely intervention from mental health and social service agencies in their communities when needed. Survey results and interviews with housing officials and staff found that relationships with social service providers were less than optimal. Prior efforts to encourage collaboration have waned.**

9. **Renewed efforts of collaboration by the current DMHAS administration are a positive step in the right direction that should be continued. Furthermore, other state agencies charged with providing social services to elderly and non-elderly disabled populations such as DMR and DSS should assist housing authorities in identifying and accessing available social services offered through their agencies. Each agency should consider appointing a lead contact person to establish and maintain a regular channel of communication with housing authorities. At a minimum, each agency should develop a plan that details outreach efforts, available services, and crisis intervention. Each agency must report a summary of its collaboration efforts with housing authorities to the legislative committees with cognizance of housing matters no later than October 1, 2005.**
10. **DMHAS through its mental health providers should take an active role in training housing authority staff and in helping residents breakdown stereotypes about mental illness through presentations or materials distributed to public housing communities.**

### **Financial Impact**

- Overall, evidence gathered supports the concerns housing authority officials have expressed about the financial viability of state elderly/disabled housing projects.
  - Preliminary results from CHFA financial reviews show increasing operating expenses, lower tenant rent revenues, and significant capital improvement needs among the 199 state elderly/disabled housing projects.
  - The analysis of actual rent payments shows both groups served by state elderly/disabled housing projects have limited incomes but younger disabled tenants as a group are poorer and provide housing authorities with less rent revenue.
  - From the waiting list data for state elderly/disabled housing projects, it seems likely young disabled tenants will become an increasingly larger portion of the residents of state elderly/disabled housing projects.
  - As a group, younger disabled residents need subsidies to afford project base rents more than the population of elderly tenants.
  - To date, there has been no comprehensive assessment of current or future needs for tenant rental assistance or other types of financial support required for the state's portfolio of elderly/disabled housing projects.
11. **DECD and CHFA should jointly conduct a comprehensive assessment of current and future needs for rental assistance or other types of financial support for the state's elderly/disabled housing portfolio each year. The results of the first such analysis should be presented to the legislature committees of cognizance over housing matters no later than October 1, 2005.**

### **Other Considerations**

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- Affordable housing is in short supply in Connecticut. Overall, housing options for very low-income individuals, particularly those needing accessible units, are lacking.
- Although there are thousands of assisted units in federal public housing projects and developments financed by HUD and CHFA programs, generally few are vacant and waiting lists are long.
- Demand for tenant rental assistance for private market units, such as federal housing choice vouchers and the state rental assistance program, also far in exceeds supply.
- Supportive housing initiatives and other DMHAS residential programs are increasing affordable housing options for low-income persons with mental illness and substance addiction disabilities; the amount of current and planned supportive housing units only begin to address the needs of this population.
- Population trends indicate the current need for subsidized housing by both low-income elderly and disabled persons will continue and probably grow.
- Increasing numbers of young disabled applicants and residents, combined with lower turnover rates, means fewer state elderly/disabled units will be available over time for any new tenants.
- Information critical to effective planning, policy development, and resource allocation is not collected in a single, complete source.
- Neither current housing inventories nor the statutorily mandated accessible housing registry is of much help in matching low-income persons with affordable, accessible housing units. The state registry of accessible housing, at best, is a partial inventory of units accessible primarily to persons with physical disabilities, regardless of affordability.

**12. The state must take action to expand housing opportunities for low-income elderly and disabled individuals by promoting more quality affordable housing for all residents. As a first step, decd, the state's lead housing agency, should develop and maintain a comprehensive inventory of all publicly assisted housing in the state beginning July 1, 2006. At a minimum, the inventory should identify all existing assisted rental units by type and funding source, and include information on tenant eligibility, rents charged, available subsidies, occupancy and vacancy rates, waiting lists, and accessibility features. To assist in the department's efforts in compiling a complete inventory, the statutes should be amended to require property owners, both public and private, to report all accessible housing units to the state registry.**

### Policy Options

- Over the years, the legislature has considered a number of proposals to change the tenant composition of the state projects to address concerns about conflicts and safety.
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- As part of the study, committee staff evaluated the social and financial impact, as well as the legal ramifications, of a range of alternative policies for state elderly/disabled housing.
- Five possible options were identified and assessed: Current Policy with Stronger Management Tools; Designation Plan; Percentage Goals; Total Age Restriction; and Partial Age Restriction.
- No option provides a satisfactory remedy for every concern about state elderly/disabled housing. Each has benefits and drawbacks and which is the "best" alternative depends largely on the priority placed on conflicting policy goals.

**13. Ten million dollars shall be appropriated annually to create additional affordable housing for low-income elderly and disabled persons.**